Barriers and Facilitators to Emergency Contraceptive Acceptance in Western Honduras

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Abstract

Emergency contraception (EC) in the form of combined oral contraceptives in high doses became part of the Honduran Ministry of Health’s Family planning policy in June 2003. EC was promoted and made available through the Ministry of Health and the Honduran Association of Family Planning. The introduction and acceptance of emergency contraception has been difficult in Honduras because many people have never heard of the method. Confusion about EC’s timing, dose and whether it is abortion persists. This study explores barriers and facilitators to EC acceptance in three states of western Honduras. Qualitative methods were used to elicit beliefs and norms about emergency contraception among women of reproductive age (15-45 years). The study also explored women’s experiences with unwanted pregnancies and abortion and how those experiences shape their acceptability of emergency contraception. Positive experiences with contraception, experience with unwanted pregnancy, and failed attempts to abort unwanted pregnancies are associated with women’s acceptance of EC. Fears and beliefs about contraception, negative experiences with contraception, and family influences make women guarded about emergency contraception and many would like more information about the method.

Study Objective

To explore personal opinions and social norms about emergency contraception and its acceptability among women of reproductive age (15-45 years) in the states of Lempira, Copán, and Ocoatepeque in western Honduras.

Research Questions

- What are the relationships between knowledge about contraception and abortion methods and the acceptability of emergency contraception?
- How do women’s fears and beliefs surrounding contraception, unwanted pregnancy, and abortion shape women’s acceptability of emergency contraception?
- What are societal opinions about emergency contraception? How do social norms about contraception, unwanted pregnancy, and abortion shape women’s beliefs and acceptance of emergency contraception?

Methods

- Qualitative Methods: 6 focus groups (59 participants) and 20 in-depth interviews between May-August 2004.
- Women recruited with the help of ASHONPLATA nurses and health promoters.
- Focus group and in-depth interview guides used.
- Principal investigator conducted all focus groups and in-depth interviews in Spanish.
- Focus groups and in-depth interviews were tape recorded and transcribed.

Results

Women’s fears and beliefs surrounding contraception, unwanted pregnancy, and abortion influence women’s acceptance of emergency contraception. Women were interested in this new method and wanted more information about how to take it and when, and as an alternative to abortion and unwanted pregnancies. Despite all of their fears about contraception, unwanted pregnancy, and abortion, women felt that it was an important new option, especially for younger women.

Knowledge about Emergency Contraception:

Seven women in the study had heard of emergency contraception. Recently I heard that there is a pill coming out that after . . . when a couple has (sexual) relations you can take it to prevent a pregnancy. That you can take it if I don’t know how many hours after. . . after having had you can take it and you won’t get pregnant.

(Age 44, 12 years of education, 4 children, Single, Catholic, Urban Residence)

Barriers:

Belief that a woman should not use contraception before she has at least one child.

Because before [the first child] they say that one becomes sterile if they plan their family before they have their first child.

(Age 31, 6 years of education, 4 children, Married, Catholic, Urban Residence)

Belief that contraceptive use causes cancer and other diseases.

I wanted to get the operation, but before they used to tell you that this was bad, that it caused cancer...and illness in the womb. . .

(Age 31, 6 years of education, 4 children, Married, Catholic, Urban Residence)

Facilitators:

Fear of Unwanted Pregnancy

This pregnancy that she has . . . well she didn’t want it. It is there and she has to accept it also right . . . even though she didn’t want it because this woman suffered when she got pregnant, only crying, crying.

(Age 45, 4 years of education, 6 children, Married, Evangelical, Rural Residence)

Fear of Abortion

An abortion is more dangerous than a birth. And worse if you if you don’t do it in conditions with someone specialized, with hygiene, and responsible about what they are doing. You can die.

(Age 30, 12 years of education, 3 children, Married, Evangelical, Urban Residence)

Conclusions

- Beliefs and fears that modern contraceptives cause sterility, cancer, and other diseases prevent women from using contraceptive methods.
- Women who believe that a woman must not use modern contraception before she has her first child may not be accepting of emergency contraception.
- Other potential barriers to emergency contraceptive use are confusion about whether emergency contraception is abortion, its timing, and its dose.
- Facilitators of emergency contraceptive acceptance in this setting are that women already employ methods similar to emergency contraception, they fear unwanted pregnancy and abortion, and they are generally accepting of and interested in emergency contraception.